

Our Exquisite Corpse: What you leave, what you take

Sara Gancedo Lesmes, 17/11/2024

When you enter the downstairs room of Theatre Kikker, the lights are dim and the conversations that float in the air are quiet and intimate. On the walls, the light illuminates a series of photographs: this is the exhibition *ON HOLD* by Prins de Vos, which portrays queer people in the Netherlands who are waiting for gender-affirming care. The models pose casually in their houses, most of them alone. You walk around, looking at them. They often look back, but their expressions remain indecipherable, suspended in the timeless time of the waiting.

You take your time to approach the part of the room that remains illuminated: a long wooden table, its surface almost completely covered by pieces of fabric and sewing supplies. Around it, seven people are sitting, chatting and embroidering. There are still a few empty chairs, so you sit down at the further end.

"Do you know what we are doing here?", someone asks in front of you. This is Arlo, as you will find out in a few moments.

You hesitate, briefly.

"It is not an exam", another person says next to you. This is Iris. "We just want to know how much we need to explain".

You do know what they are doing, but you still want to hear it directly from them. As they explain, this is the latest iteration of *Our Exquisite Corpse*, a project by the queer platform The Pink Cube (Arlo van Lierop and Iris Rijnsewijn). It aims to create a collective quilt, to which anyone can contribute by embroidering as many tiles as they want. The time spent by all involved is tracked and it will be summed up until the total reaches 1.577.846 minutes, that is, 30 months: the average waiting time for gender-affirming care in the Netherlands. You can almost feel the subjects in the photos on the wall looking at the table, overseeing this collective act of solidarity and protest.

You quickly feel welcome here. The Pink Cube are gentle in their explanations and they assure you that you need no experience to participate as they pass you the embroidering materials. You get the chronometer on your phone running just before you start trying to thread your needle. Meanwhile, you can't help but listen to the conversation happening on the other side of the table about the difficulties of using gender-neutral language in Italian. In a few minutes, an elderly woman will sit in front of you and will share her struggle to "keep up" with pronouns, but also her fierce desire to protect trans children from anyone who tries to hurt them. The embroidery table, as you soon realise, has become a site for (queer) conversation, a safe place to discuss, gossip and share.

Collective sewing practices have an extensive historical connection with social movements. From anti-slavery sewing circles in XIX century England to the *arpilleras* in Pinochet's Chile, they have long been a way for women to get together and organise resistance. This spirit resonates with *Our Exquisite Corpse*; but this project specially echoes the AIDS Memorial Quilt, composed by thousands of quilt panels, each one of them honouring the name of a person lost to AIDS.

In the time you spend on the embroidery table, you manage to make a simple circle of white thread on your blue piece of fabric. It looks somewhat flimsy, somewhat thin, but it is round and done and you feel something akin to pride. You leave it on the table for another person to complete. Even if brief, the time spent at *Our Exquisite Corpse* has had the peaceful quality of an evening doing crafts with friends. This initiative, you realise, does not only raise awareness of the long waiting lists to get gender-affirming care in the Netherlands. It also takes the painful 26.297 hours of average waiting and it turns them into something different: shared time in a community.